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Libya's Qaddafi: shattered dreams, fear of coup plots

He seems little like the idealist
who overthrew King Idris in '69

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

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A scowl furrows his brow. His face showing the strain of living for years under threat of assassination, Muammar Qaddafi listens.

The Libyan leader tries to concentrate for a moment on the questions newsmen fire at him at a Tripoli news conference. His thoughts seem far away.

Even as Colonel Qaddafi accuses Britain of framing his former emissaries in London for the murder of a British policewoman to provoke Britain to break ties with Libya, his eyes seem to look beyond the TV cameras in the security-cordoned room.

SIMON GANNA LIAISON



Losing his hold on Libya?

Isolated from neighbors whom he has alternately helped with money and arms and harmed with conspiracies, Qaddafi is a leader haunted by his past, say former intimate friends and associates. They say his thoughts are often filled by memories of disastrous military adventures, such as his support for Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, or his present encounter with the French-backed regime in neighboring Chad.

Perhaps other specters cross his vision: shattered plans for Libya's union with Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, and even Syria.

The TV cameras show Qaddafi return from his reverie. He faces the reporters again and offers France a carrot: mutual withdrawal of French and Libyan troops from Chad. Then he wields a stick against Britain: a threat to again aid guerrillas from the outlawed Irish Republican Army.

The troubled leader on the television screen seems to have little in common with the idealistic and unknown young man this reporter first met in Tripoli in 1969,

only days after he and a baker's dozen of like-minded other young lieutenants had overthrown the Western-protected King Idris.

Qaddafi is zealous, puritanical, and conspiratorial. His moods vacillate between elation and depression, although he is still charged with a sense of mission. That mission, he often said in so many words, was to continue the struggle for Arab unity and liberation begun by his idol, Egypt's late President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Now, Qaddafi's Libyan opponents say — with much evidence to support them — Qaddafi's direct personal hand on Libya's tiller is partly replaced by a kind of revolutionary directorate. Its members are young zealots, scarcely known even in Libya. Qaddafi, denying that he is chief of state, can approve or disavow their acts and decisions as he chooses.

Qaddafi's opponents say this inchoate system breeds chaos.

"Opposition is sweeping Libya like a growing storm," says Muhammad Magarief, once a financial controller, who is shocked by Qaddafi's reckless spending of Libya's oil wealth on foreign adventures.

Abdul Hamid Bakkoush, who served as prime minister for King Idris, agrees. He adds that overthrowing Qaddafi, protected as he is by loyal tribesmen and East German security guards, may not be easy.

Many close observers wonder about Qaddafi's sanity. Newsmen in Libya recently reported that he is said to depend heavily on tranquilizers, and that he acts like a man in physical danger.

The confusion evident in Qaddafi's thinking and utterances is matched by apparent incoherence in his policies. Dreams he had as a student at the Libyan military academy centered on Arab unity and liberation. But with each foreign misadventure, these dreams have faded.

By the time the United States suspended diplomatic ties with Libya in 1981, Qaddafi had begun to lash out at neighbors and had alienated friends, including US and

other Western intelligence agencies, which at first felt his anticommunist, Muslim zeal deserved protection.

Qaddafi's targets had included Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco. Then his tactics began to change. He indulged in a series of on-again, off-again flirtations with "reactionary" regimes, as he had called them, like those of the Moroccan and Saudi Arabian kingdoms.

Qaddafi first offered, then withdrew, help for Moroccan King Hassan's adversaries, the Polisario guerrillas fighting Morocco for control of the former Western Sahara. Qaddafi kept up sporadic pressure on Tunisia. He has even turned against Algeria, which he once termed a "revolutionary sister state."

Recently he has financially supported an Islamic fundamentalist group headed by Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria's first president after independence, now considered in Algeria a subversive nuisance to President Chadli Benjedid's government.

In the Mideast, Qaddafi helps various radical Palestinian guerrilla groups, but spurns as an enemy the mainstream Palestine Liberation Organization chairman,

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